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COMPOSITION IN THE OPEN

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A Freshman entered the small place I called my office, seated himself, and gazed upon me with lackluster eye.

"I can't write description," he observed calmly.

"What makes you think that?" I inquired.

"I don't think it; I know it. I've been walking around this town for four hours trying to find something to write about, and I can't find a thing. If I did, I couldn't write about it. Yes, I know you've told us how to do it, but that's not doing it by a long shot." He laid some untidy sheets before me. "You told us to describe an outdoor scene. There's a few of the things I've done."

With considerable difficulty I made out a few lucid lines among his erasures and crisscrossings. "Last evening I saw a beautiful sunset." "A beautiful scene lies west of the campus." "As I came toward the main building it reminded me of a castle." They were not really seductive openings.

"But you have been looking for something hard. The most interesting things are often easiest to see."

"I don't know of anything easier to see than the main building."

"And then," I went on hastily, "just write them up simply and naturally, and make others see what interests you"—

"That's what I'm telling you; I can't. I can't see the good things and I can't write them up when I do. It's all right to talk about selection and dominant impression and all that, but when I try to work them out my mind gets paralyzed. And you know what kind of marks you give me."

I did know. I knew also that Raymond represented a rather large number of Freshmen who were of average ability and whose work was yet discouragingly poor. What ought to have been to them a natural expression was a nightmare of unco-ordinated effort, because, somehow, they could not get started right.

I wanted time to ponder on it; but meanwhile something must be done for Raymond.

"Suppose," I suggested, "you go out along the cemetery road; stop halfway up the hill, at the two cedars, and look off to the west where that little stream comes down through the meadow. If you like it, tell how it makes you feel, and try to describe it so that I can see why. Show from what point you are looking at it, and don't forget to take things up in some reasonable order; perhaps it would be better to begin with the distance, since you will probably feel the sunset first. But the thing you are aiming at is to make me see that one stretch of meadow as it looks this evening; and to do that you will have to look at it a long time, until you see very little else. Don't worry about your grade; I think it will be a good one."

At an early hour the following afternoon the door of my office was thrown open without a knock, and Raymond burst in. Forgetting the great gulf that ought to lie between a Freshman and his instructor, he flung down a paper upon my desk, all but clapped me on the shoulder, and declared enthusiastically, "Say, I've done it!"

"Done what?" I demanded with interest.

"Written a description. It isn't so bad, either," he added modestly, "when you put it beside the others I've done."

This is what he had written:

I was homesick, and the chilly dusk of the spring evening suited my mood as I climbed upon the fence and settled myself to look off toward the sunset and home. There was a dull red glow above the deep shadows of the woods, out of which a small stream wound toward me through the meadow, making a thread of light as it caught the reflection from the sky. On either side of it the meadow rolled away, up toward the cemetery to the south and northward to the railroad, where a freight train puffed lonesomely away. Up and down the hill the white road with its flagged walks stretched away from me. I sat there on the fence while the shadows gathered, and as I leaned back against the cedar tree I must have dozed; for when I heard a familiar tinkle, and a half dozen cattle came nibbling toward me, I thought for a moment that I was at the edge of the old home pasture, many miles away.

It was not a work of genius, and no doubt, with Raymond's past palsied efforts in my mind's eye, I was not an impartial judge. But I received it with acclaim.

"Now," I asked him, when we had concluded our mutual rejoicings, "can you tell me why you succeeded better with this theme than with the others?" And he answered promptly, "Because you told me exactly where to go and what to do. If you'd been there to answer some questions I could have done it better yet. But I guess, now that I've done it once, I can get along by myself. Getting the thing done once is worth being told how to do it a dozen times."

I did some thinking in the ensuing days, and especially I meditated upon Raymond's closing remark. Up to this time I had followed, without much thought, the theory that composition can be taught within the classroom. Judging from Raymond, something more was needed. I began to wonder why we are so afraid of giving active assistance in composition. The student of science works everything out under careful supervision in the laboratory and the young artist is placed before his model and directed in every detail of his earlier effort; but when we would teach a young person to write, we pour out a flood of theory upon him, perhaps give him a fleeting glimpse of a model or two, and thrust him forth to accomplish unassisted the creation we demand of him. If we only helped him to get the thing done a few times!

It required some courage to put into effect the conviction which grew out of these reflections, for I have no more than the average fondness for being laughed at; but the plan seemed to demand a trial. One morning, at the regular class hour for Rhetoric 1 c, the cattle grazing on the green top of a hill at the edge of the town retreated to make room for some twenty-five young men and women. The students gathered in a knot for a few minutes, while their attention was called to the various possible applications of every point of the theory of description which they had studied in the classroom. They then dispersed, and proceeded gravely and earnestly to the choice of a point of view and the selection of material. A casual onlooker might have derived considerable entertainment from the spectacle of a youth letting himself down into a small hollow, that he might experiment with horizons, or of a girl dreamily endeavoring to catch the dominant impression of the valley. But the instructor was too busy giving assistance to be

amused, and was, besides, too happy at the sight of this novel interest and absorption on the faces of Freshmen writing descriptive themes.

The same procedure was carried out with Section *e*, which immediately followed. I will not say it was not a breathless pursuit, for Sunset Hill was some distance from the campus, and the class hour was necessarily cut down nearly half; but that half-hour was worth any two that had been spent in the classroom. When the themes came in the next day, they were beyond the expectations of my most sanguine moment. Eighty per cent of them were descriptions of really high merit, judged by Freshman standards; while nearly 96 per cent showed better than the average work of their writers.

The conclusion was so obvious as to lead us to a trial of the plan within the classroom. I say "us," for I took the Freshmen into my confidence. I half expected them to laugh; on the contrary, they received the idea with enthusiasm. We were so fortunate as to have a room located in a first-floor corner, with a much-traveled walk leading past its windows, and more than once a lecture was halted midway in its orderly and dignified progress, that its theory might be put into immediate practice, while some picturesque individual or gesticulating group was experimented upon. It was hard upon the public, but they were offered in a holy cause. Then we watched the weather; we listened for sounds of rain and wind, studied the varying blacks and grays of the tree trunks on the campus in rain and mist and sunshine, and helped each other to words for the expression of all that interested us. It seemed childish, I must admit; but the fact remains that an unprecedented number of Freshmen made high marks in description that year.

Before the college May Day celebration the Freshmen throughout the department of rhetoric were given as an assignment the choice of a group of topics such as the following:

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| A dance. | A study in color. | A conversation overheard. |
| Sounds in the crowd. | | An impromptu performance. |
| A face in the crowd. | | Something that aroused sympathy. |

Their enjoyment of the occasion did not seem to be, as some of our friends in other departments had gloomily prophesied that

it would be, destroyed by our brutal requirement. So far as we could discover, the day was not desolated for them by the fact that they went forth knowing what they meant to see and hear, instead of passing through it in a jumble of color and motion and sound. Afterward they wrote, and wrote well.

To send them to the busy corners downtown on Saturday to find their own material when the streets were crowded with marketing farmers, completed the work for the time.

The year following, in another college, I conducted a Sophomore course in exposition. If anyone has ever been able, in the time that can be devoted to the subject, to prepare the average Freshman to write sustained exposition, I should like to meet that teacher. My Sophomores were out of their depth when I asked them to get beyond four or five hundred words. I gave them such practice as I could in class, but it was totally inadequate to their need. At length I decided to see what could be done by the laboratory method. Arrangement was made with various institutions and industries of the town and the region. A broom factory, a pottery, a coal mine and a gold mine, the state school for the deaf and blind, a sanatorium, and a newspaper office threw open their doors. The students were carefully primed as to the exact kind of observations they were to make and the principles that were to govern them in taking notes; they were then conducted through these places. They asked questions that were considerately and carefully answered by their guides, and they took many carefully classified notes. The themes which they wrote for this assignment were well-planned, clear, and interesting articles varying in length from one thousand to ten thousand words. It was the first lot of the year in which poor work was the exception. Poor work was also the exception in the subsequent assignment, in which they discussed industrial and social phases of what they had seen. Even this, however, might not have proved the rule conclusively, had it not been for the fact that they maintained in their independent work the standard which they had reached in this.